



Essay

by a patient for a UH English class

This essay was found among Fred Gilbert's papers. It was written by a young patient with juvenile diabetes who died from her illness in 1983.

My Guardian Angel

"Bonnie, may I call an ambulance?" As Mother asked, I was suddenly startled to realize how long she had waited to do so.

"Okay," I mumbled weakly, but as she left the room my head suddenly cleared, my voice gained strength, and I yelled after her, "but get me admitted under Fred!"

As I slipped back into unconsciousness I think I heard a groan from the living room.

Fred is my guardian angel. He has been practicing medicine in Hawaii for more than 27 years. Probably longer, but he has taken care of me for 27, so that is all I can accurately vouch for. But who and what is Fred that makes me turn to him in times of need? I have pondered this more and more often lately.

There is a quality about Fred that is difficult to get my hands and mind on. It is more of a feeling-sensing thing. Fred *knows* me, I mean really knows me. Not just the physical body stuff, but whatever else it is that makes me *me*. Recently Fred, although not the doctor of record, suggested psychiatric consultations because I was not responding *normally*. I only learned it was his suggestion weeks later, as the physician of record passed it off as his own.

I remember one incident back in the middle 1960s. I was in the examining room, feeling miserable. I obviously had a severe bronchial condition, fever, coughing, and just feeling generally awful. Fred stood studying my chart, rifling the pages. Then he'd turn and look intently at me. He repeated this several times, not saying anything, just studying first the chart and then me. When he looked at me, his usually twinkling eyes were dark, somber pools and they seemed to burn right into me. Finally he announced, "I want to do a urinalysis. I think you have a kidney infection."

I was startled as I had no symptoms to indicate that. My lungs were horribly congested; I coughed convulsively and had a fever. From previous experience I knew it was a bronchial condition. Well, it was that, but when the lab results came down, I also had a raging kidney infection! I have often wondered if Fred employed iridology or is simply psychic. I opt for the latter.

Fred has always had time for me. Even when he is busy he has time. If it is two minutes then he is totally, mentally as well as physically, with me for those two minutes and they seem like 20. But frequently he gives me hours. I remember once, in 1978, while hospitalized for another condition, I suddenly went blind. Fred spent almost an hour, and almost every day while this situation existed, with me. Always talking quietly, he would tell me that there were ways of working it out, that I could continue to live alone if that's what I wanted to do. He told me of support systems that I could tap into and worked out how a multitude of daily tasks could be handled. He was there, totally, and those hours were very important because they laid the groundwork for what was to come later. The blindness was reversed for the time being, but one year later, almost to the day, it was upon me again.

Because of Fred, his caring and his time, I was mentally able to tap in, get my physical needs met, and today, more than two-and-a-half years later, I still live alone.

Another time, while I was again in the hospital, I asked a question and Fred sat down to explain acidosis to me, a negative diabetic condition. He sat there for what seemed like hours and talked to me in very scientific terms. But then he always did. It is something that amuses, pleases, and puzzles me. From my teens, Fred has explained things to me as though I were another doctor, and he seems to believe and expect that I understand what he is saying. I may not remember the details, and almost none of the words, but I almost always have an inner, nonintellectual understanding of the process and am able to apply this knowledge in my life.

A natural teacher, Fred is now lecturing at the local medical school. I have never been sure how he did it, but Fred taught me to think for myself. My understanding of my diabetic condition, what was going on, and what could be done to effectively correct certain situations used to anger other doctors. Fred is the only doctor I have ever gone to who has an ego that can handle not always being boss or the learned professional. He never gave me any orders or told me that I *had* to do or not do anything. He was and is always quiet and unassuming, nonjudgmental, and it seems, always smiling.

Except for one time that I can remember, and even then I'm not sure. During a very long hospitalization, my veins had been very badly overworked by blood testing. There were several doctors on the case, each one doing his own thing. One of them was on a real ego trip—insisting on being boss, very demanding, almost cruel. This doctor barged into my room one day while Fred was there and, interrupting the existing conversation, demanded to know when I would allow the IVs back into my veins. My mind went blank and all I could do was stare at him. IVs and blood tests had always been very traumatic for me, and for me now to give voluntary permission was something my emotional mental body could not deal with, especially after just completing a solid 18 days hooked up to little glass bottles. The doctor stomped out after I had explained all this. This doctor was also doing daily blood tests, sometimes twice a day, and Fred had been getting occasional blood sugars. Very inconspicuously Fred managed to let me know that he was canceling all blood work. I'm just not sure how he imparted this to me because he did not come right out and say anything about it. Anyway, when the lab technician entered my room the next morning I was quite unprepared. Later in the morning when the results should have been back, I pushed the intercom button and asked for the results. Simultaneously, through my open door, and being right next to the nurses' station, I heard Fred's voice as he greeted a nurse. He had to have heard my question. The nurse told me the results were not back yet. I could hear low but intense talking and knew that Fred was one of the participants. After what seemed like forever, I pushed the button, repeated my question, and was told that no blood sugar had been run that day. Shortly after that Fred left the floor. He did not come in that day. I think he was very angry. After that the blood tests did stop and the other doctor stopped bugging me about resuming IV therapy. In 27 years, that was the only time that I have ever known Fred to be angry, and I don't actually know it now. It could be that I have been very unaware or it could be that he just doesn't get angry unless really pushed, and Fred is not the kind of man who gets pushed very often.

He is very sure of himself. At least that is the image perceived by others. He has a quiet, self-assuredness about him. Today a

popular term for this is *centered*. Fred is centered. He appears totally focused on what he is doing at a particular moment. When he is with me, he is with me, not thinking about where else he should or could be or what he is going to say at that medical convention in Europe next week.

At this point, two doctors are urging me to change my lifestyle, to stop living alone. I have not yet discussed this with Fred but I know he understands my need to live alone, and my interest in colors and writing as he has continued to keep himself active. And he is active. He practices medicine, teaches at the University, attends several international conferences, usually as a

speaker, and he plays tennis—sometimes at 11 pm—surfs, and gets away to ski whenever he can. Once in 1979 he told me that the day before he had spotted a skateboard left by the side of the driveway and he couldn't resist the impulse to try it out. On he jumped and did quite well until it was time to turn or dismount or something like that. He went sprawling. I can picture him, sitting there with a very amazed look on his face, a shake of the head, and gingerly righting himself, moving off toward his motorcycle. He had to get to work.

"It's not quite like riding a surfboard," he said, his voice smiling the whole time. I'll bet his eyes were twinkling too. He

tells me some very interesting things. Once he explained that southern Spaniards spoke more slowly and with a Spanish drawl that was different from the northern Spaniards, equating it to the speech variations in our own country based on regionality. It has to do with climate. For an establishment medical man, he knows some very interesting things. He added a fact I had not come across in my garlic research, and he thinks foot massage is a positive activity, aiding in good health. I had a tape of a Hindu mantra going when he came into my room one day. As I reached over to turn it off, his comment was, "That's very good."

During this last hospitalization, Fred was not the physician of record. But he was there. He showed up in an x-ray room during an upper-GI series. The room was cold, seemed horribly dark and gloomy, and I felt awful. During a film-changing break he was suddenly there with his, "Well hello, Bonnie, how's it going?" I was, to say the least, surprised. He sounded as though it was a perfectly natural place for him to be under the circumstances, and after I got over my surprise, it seemed perfectly natural to me too. Fred has always *been there*, no matter what the hour, the place, or his other responsibilities. For me, he has always been there, taking care of the physical, supporting the emotional, stimulating the intellectual, and very recently I have realized, that somehow he is also having an effect on the spiritual part of me.

After all these years of emergencies, trouble, and probably some exasperation that I have been to him, it is slowly dawning on me that I am more than a patient to him. I am a person. I think Fred likes me.

Bonnie Williamson

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